

The youngest son, George, and his sister, Paula, transferred old films of my stepfather's onto computer discs for Thanksgiving. Included were shots taken by movie camera of family reunions, showing children toddling about the ranch house yard with grandfathers and grandmothers.

Part of the footage covered his family's celebration -- very fine people, important in the founding of the shortgrass country. Included, also, were frames of a big cow work at the Canning family's Block Ranch in New Mexico and various shearing operations on his Big Bend ranches.

The first night after the showing, I awakened twisted in bed sheets knotted in intricate slip-knots that'd make the handiwork of the Mad Strangler of London an example for tenderfoot scouting. Dreams spun with familiar faces. The moon cast motionless shadows across the bedroom floor to grandmother's rocking chair, making it a hard choice whether to close the curtains or closet the chair before it rocked, like it rocked the night a high wind blew part of the roof off the ranch house. (Grandmother and my mother were always restless during storms.)

But back to the film: farther along, my grandparents celebrated a 50-year wedding anniversary. In the sequence,

aunts, uncles, cousins, the known and unknowns flashed alive, eating cake and admiring presents. All wore smiles except the few cursed by being camera shy.

What a gallery flicked over the screen. What a shock to know what was going to happen to those folks in the next 50 years — or to any of us. It didn't make sense, but had one old charmer of an aunt stepped from the picture, I'd have been glad to make her a loan even though recovering any dough she got her hands on was equal to expecting a Congressman to return a campaign contribution.

The honored, my grandfather, stood as stiff as his starched collar above his one suit coat. He was such a grand old guy. Homesteaded land, ranched, raised a family, and best of all lived long enough to peel river pecans for his great-grandsons in the front yard of the rock house on Saturday mornings.

Attention centered, too, on Grandmother, her hair the blue-white of women of that age in a purple, white-collared church dress profiled as pious as a spring nymph. Not a clue showing she taught me to roll cigarettes at six years of age so I wouldn't tell that she committed the fatal sin of dipping snuff on the sly.

Yes, sweet old grannies protected by time. A friend, Carol Wilson in Peach Tree, Georgia, wrote that she found a

marker in one of her grandmother's books before the holiday.

"The humorless, staid old lady hid these words," she said: 'See the happy moron. He doesn't give a damn. I wish I were a moron. Oh, God, maybe I am.'"

The roundup scenes in New Mexico on the Canning ranches took a lot of film to catch the big herd and the action of the cowboys working horseback, cutting and pairing cattle. He also shot a picture of one of the owners taking off in a small plane — an oddity to have a plane on a ranch in the 1950s. Spliced in from one of my stepdad's operations in the Glass Mountains were pictures of two Mexican cowboys breaking horses in a round pole corral. Good hands, *jinetes*, roping tough, blue haired, black-footed mountain horses. Even on silent film, the tension of the hombre making the final ascent from ground to stirrup to leather while mounting those devils in a partly slick, rock-floored corral came clear.

I asked my son to stop at frames of the unpapered aliens. The oldest one was the cowboy from Musquiz, who hid in caves to avoid the Border Patrol. He was wild as the horses he rode over the slick rocks down into rough draws to gather his boss's sheep. His name was Luis. He couldn't read or write his name, much less count the catch of his

fame, the outlawed, naked-legged mountain sheep that raised my stepdad such heavy lambs.

The other was the kid Mother gentled on oatmeal cookies and taught to read a calendar. He was one of her pets, along with every foot-walking Mexican who passed by her kitchen weary and hungry.

Today, they are branded as "undesirable aliens," so bad, they are worthy of building 750 miles of fence along the Rio Grande to divert the course used crossing the 2300-mile border.

Far be it for a herder to counsel a Congressman, but choosing the word "undesirable" for incrimination might be better postponed by the duly elected until he or she evaluates how mad voters still are about the shameful behavior on the Potomac River.

I am sleeping better. Well, I was until I found a nose-band for a hackamore Luis plaited from rawhide in the saddle shed. Tomorrow, or maybe after Christmas, I am going to throw those old saddles and broken reins in the dump.